

Field Report

Parker Strip Recreation Management Area

■ 1.0 Summary

The Parker Strip Recreation Management Area (RMA) is a 25,400-acre area located on the border of Arizona and California. It is mainly a recreation-based site centered along the Colorado River. The area falls under different jurisdictions that manage and provide recreational opportunities for visitors, including the BLM, the Bureau of Reclamation, the State of Arizona, La Paz County, and the private sector. The public lands provide open space, wildlife habitat, and other multiple uses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Parker Strip Recreation Management Area



Visitation is heaviest in the winter when the weather is warm relative to the colder northern climates. Persons visiting the Parker Strip are typically from the northern United States and Canada. Most visitors use private automobiles and recreational vehicles (RVs) to access different destinations along the 11-mile Parker Strip area.

Parker Strip staff have informally discussed the possibility of a commercially operated “watertaxi” between the Blue Water Casino located on tribal lands 10 miles south along the Colorado River, and the Parker Strip recreational facilities. Otherwise, there appears to be little need for an Alternative Transportation System (ATS) within Parker Strip. Reasons for this include the fact that the facility is quite large, the activity centers are widely dispersed, the primary visitation occurs during the winter peak season and is significantly lower during off-peak seasons, parking demand rarely exceeds supply, and traffic congestion rarely occurs during peak and off-peak visitation periods.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1. Location

As shown in Figure 2, the Parker Strip RMA is located along the Colorado River near the Arizona and California State line. The River flows north to south through the Parker Strip area. It stretches from Parker Dam south to the Colorado River Indian Reservation boundary. Route 95 runs parallel along the eastern side of the river in Arizona, while Parker Dam Road runs along the western edge in California. Lake Havasu City is approximately 20 miles to the north, and the City of Parker is less than five miles from the southern border of the Parker Strip planning boundary.

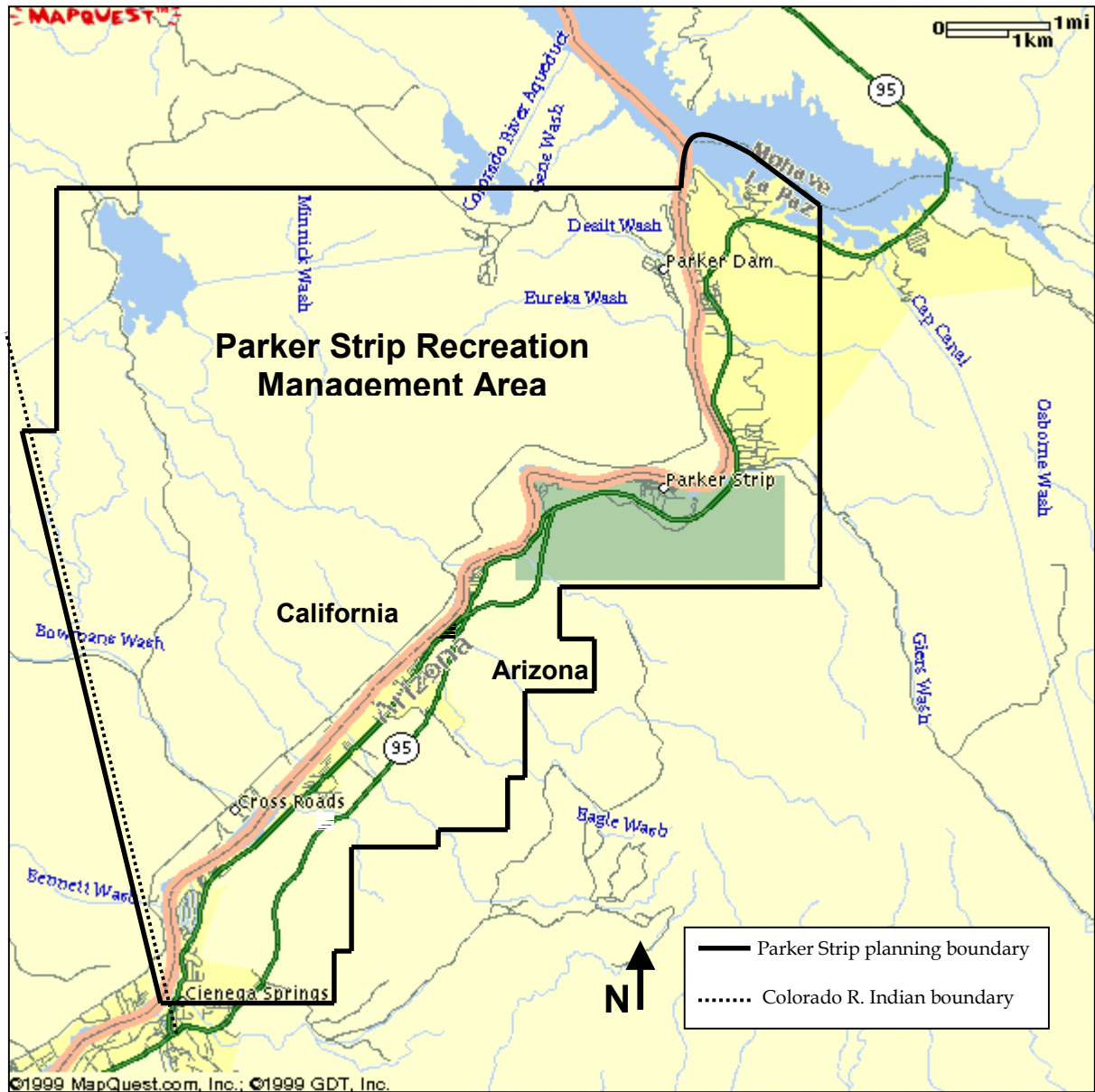
2.2 Administration and Classification

The BLM, Havasu Resource Area, Yuma District is charged with overall administration responsibility for Parker Strip. Management of the 25,400-acre Special RMA is conducted out of its Lake Havasu City headquarters. Planning responsibility for Parker Strip is conducted in cooperation with the Bureau of Reclamation, the State of Arizona and State of California parks departments, the La Paz County parks department, the Metropolitan Water District, and other private landowners and concessionaires. The Bureau of Reclamation regulates the water flow on the Colorado River at Parker Dam and its associated reservoirs. Water quality is monitored by the U.S. Geological Survey, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

2.3 Physical Description

Parker Strip is comprised of approximately 25,400 acres of land including: 14,600 acres of public lands, 3,500 acres of State of Arizona lands, 143 acres of State of California lands, and 7,200 acres of private lands. Most of the management area is contained within the Sonoran/Mojave Desert zone. It is divided into steep, rocky, mountainous areas, and nearly flat alluvial fans. The BLM manages 11 recreation/day use facilities along the Colorado River. The Bullfrog Day Use Area and the Empire Landing are the most developed facilities along the Parker Strip.

Figure 2. Parker Strip Vicinity Map



2.4 Mission and Goals of the Recreation Management Area

The mission of the Parker Strip is to provide diverse recreational opportunities and enhance the existing recreational uses for visitors, and to protect the wildlife habitat. Furthermore, the management plan stresses the need for implementation of strong public and private cooperative efforts to provide enhanced recreational activities for visitors. It has identified several goals including the following:

- **Visitor Facilities and Services**

- Enhancement of the facilities and services in all existing developed areas; and
- Enhancement of the existing visitor management program through improved facilities design, improved interpretive programming, and increased BLM presence.

- **Environmental Management**

- Reduction of the potential impacts on the wildlife habitat and visual sources through the appropriate placement and construction of facilities, and through the restriction of fire wood collection;
- Management of off-highway vehicle use through route and area designations and increased enforcement; and
- Identification and mitigation of cultural properties affected by the actions of the management plan.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Recreational opportunities at Parker Strip have both a regional and national significance. In 1998, visitation to Parker Strip was estimated to be 3.7 million people. Peak visitation typically occurs on summer weekends and in the winter between October and April. Visitation is often highest during the Memorial Day weekend when all facilities along the River are filled to capacity. In past years, the area has also had an increase in the number of spring break visitors. Due to the hot summer weather and mild winter weather, winter visitation has outgrown summer visitation.

Most summer visitors are from southern California or Arizona. Summer visitors can be divided into four groups:

1. Semiannual visitors, owning summer or second homes at Parker Strip, with an average stay of one to five months;
2. Vacation visitors (camping, boating) staying in the RV or campground facilities with an average stay of one to two weeks;
3. Weekend visitors, using the facility similarly to vacation visitors, with a stay of two to three days (with portions of these visitors returning multiple times during the summer season); and
4. Day use visitors with an average stay of four to six hours.

Semiannual and vacation visitors are typically families. Weekend visitors often consist of groups of friends. These groups tend to “band together” and pool their resources to maximize their use of the facility’s water recreation equipment and lodging facilities.

Winter visitors are typically retired, mobile and active senior citizens. They tend to spend more time and money in the local businesses and communities. They tend to be from

colder northern states and Canada. They typically stay longer (a few months at a time) and tend to move from site to site within the site. Many arrive with RVs while some own winter homes in the site. Both the winter homes and RVs are used by the senior citizens as a base for touring the southwest United States. Winter visitation peak periods occur in late January and early February during the Quartzite Pow-Wow, a weeklong gem and mineral show. Winter visitors have broad interests including activities such as fishing, golfing, hiking, and general sightseeing.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Currently, Parker Strip staff are concerned with an 11-mile stretch of Parker Dam Road from Parker Dam to the Colorado River Indian Tribal Reservation boundary (see Figure 3). This road has recently been designated as a National Back Country Byway. This two-lane road is winding and narrow and is frequently used by bicyclists, pedestrians, and visitors pulling their vehicles off the side of the road for hiking and sightseeing. The average daily traffic (ADT) at the north end of Parker Dam Road ranges from 1,530 to 2,360, according to traffic counts taken by San Bernardino County from January 1996 through July 1999. The ADTs at the south end of the road near Earp ranged from 697 to 1,466. Walking and hiking along the river or on nearby trails adjacent to Parker Dam Road is especially popular with winter visitors. Many sections of Parker Dam Road do not currently have shoulders, pullout areas for vehicles, or areas for bicycle or pedestrian movement or sightseeing. There were 26 traffic accidents reported during the same three-year period the traffic counts were conducted. Parker Strip staff have identified plans to pursue funding, based on the Back Country Byway designation, for the following improvements:

- Widen sections of Parker Dam Road to include shoulders for a bicycle lane;
- Potential roadside developments, such as recreational trails, campgrounds, and a new Visitor Center (currently planned for construction);
- Interpretive pullouts including recreational, wildlife, riparian, energy, historical, cultural, and geological features of the area (pullouts would accommodate two to five vehicles with barriers to control vehicle movement); and
- Potential cooperative agreements with other agencies to manage and plan for the Back Country Byway Program on Parker Dam Road including signage, tourism marketing, hazard abatement studies, highway grant funding applications, and maintenance.

Currently, there is no direct public transit connection from the nearby towns to Parker Strip. Parking capacity at most of the day use areas is not an issue, even during peak holiday seasons. For example, Route 95 and Parker Dam Road are rarely congested or operate at capacity. Most visitors continue to drive to the site using private automobiles, RVs, or trailers.

Figure 3. Parker Dam Road



3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The BLM has not coordinated a significant community development initiative in the Parker Strip area. Since most of the recreational services and facilities are provided and managed by private operators, coordinated development tends to be conducted through private initiatives. Over the years, there has been a shift from focusing on providing services to summer visitors to meeting the needs of winter visitors. Since winter visitors have become an important economic factor for local businesses, the recreation and business communities have focused resources on winter users. As a result, many businesses have been able to operate year-round servicing both winter and summer visitors. As stated in the management plan, the BLM intends to continue to lease recreational lands to private enterprises and to use private enterprises to develop recreational facilities.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Parker Strip contains over 500 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Most of the area is sparsely populated with vegetation. Marsh vegetation along the Strip is very limited, consisting mainly of small patches of cattail and bulrush. High-intensity summer and fall rainstorms can lead to flash flooding.

There are two designated routes for off-road vehicle users. These designated roadways were implemented to protect and separate recreational users from encroaching on the

natural landscape and habitat. Nevertheless, increased recreational use, especially along the Colorado River, has negatively impacted both visual resources and the wildlife habitat. Development in Arizona near the Parker Strip has also displaced portions of the native habitat and restricted wildlife access to the River.

The principle cultural resources identified within Parker Strip are prehistoric, archaeological artifacts associated with the indigenous peoples of the region (San Dieguito, Armagosa, Patayan, and Yuman cultures). These include campsites, stone tool flakes and ceramic shards, cobble quarries, trails, rock rings, sleeping circles, and various rock alignments and cairns.

A limited number of historic mining and dam construction sites from the 1930s are also located within the area. During the past few decades, extensive land development and other activities between Parker Dam Road and Arizona Highway 95 Business Loop have disturbed these cultural resources and are a cause of local concern.

The Colorado River Indian Tribes Reservation is adjacent to the Parker Strip boundary in the south and the Chemehuevi Indian Reservation is less than 10 miles to the north. The lands 30 miles on either side of the River are considered traditional territories to both groups. Both groups use the land for occupation, hunting, and recreation, and some of this land is considered sacred. Both groups have expressed concerns that cultural materials collected during recovery projects have not been adequately curated.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The BLM directly operates two campground facilities within the Parker Strip – Empire Landing and Bullfrog. They are part of the Recreation Fee Demonstration Program implemented at the national level. Empire Landing charges \$10 per vehicle for overnight use and \$3.00 per vehicle for day use. Bullfrog has a day use fee of \$3.00. The fees collected are returned to the site for facility improvement and maintenance. The BLM has estimated the combined annual revenue from this fee program to be approximately \$400,000.

Through the Federal Land Policy Management Act, BLM also has lease agreements with 11 private operators to provide recreational opportunities to visitors. This lease agreement allows private businesses to provide services and to develop recreational facilities on public lands. Many of these privately operated facilities consist of RV/trailer parks and seasonal resorts. Additional smaller private recreational properties are scattered throughout the area.

Many of the area's recreation facilities are located adjacent to the River centered on water-based activities during the summer months. Summer recreational activities are almost exclusively water-oriented and include activities such as boating, jet skiing, swimming, and sunbathing. Many visitors bring their jet skis, powerboats and various non-motorized watercrafts to the area. With a high concentration of visitors on the River, boating safety and etiquette, as well as noise and water pollution are of primary concern to the area.

Another recreational issue relates to the development of private facilities along the River including the continued limitations of public access and recreational opportunities to the River caused by the development of mobile homes and other developments.

Furthermore, there is limited information about BLM programs and opportunities at Parker Strip. For example, interpretative programs are not available for visitors to learn about the area. A Visitor Center off of Parker Dam Road is currently under construction. The finished Visitor Center will include a boat ramp, picnic area, parking facilities, and handicap access to the shoreline.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

In 1964, the Lower Colorado River Land Use Advisory Committee produced the first plan for the Colorado River. A specific plan to manage recreation uses along Parker Strip was first written by BLM in 1980. For the most part, these earlier plans have been implemented. As a result of the summer to winter visitation shift and a renewed emphasis on the development of new recreation initiatives and policies, the BLM perceived a need to update the area's management plan. The most recent plan was completed in 1993. Since 1980, the boundaries of the planning area have been revised significantly. Furthermore, the 1993 Management Plan was written to apply the goals of Recreation 2000, a BLM-wide strategic plan addressing the recreational needs and strategies required to improve the public land facilities throughout the West.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The BLM works with many public agencies to plan and manage Parker Strip. The Bureau of Reclamation coordinates with BLM to manage the area around Parker Dam including the powerhouse, the wareyard, and warehouses. The Metropolitan Water District, the largest private landowner in the area, manages the transport of Colorado River water to southern California. The BLM also has a contract with the District to maintain and manage the Parker Dam Residence Area for its employees and volunteers and also coordinates with the Colorado River Indian Tribes on management issues related to public lands adjacent to the reservations.

The Buckskin Mountains State Park and the La Paz County Park also lease public lands from the BLM. Parker Strip has two camping areas in the River Island Unit and the Buckskin Mountain Unit, as well as a concession program within public lands to provide supplies and services. La Paz County leases and manages three areas within Parker Strip – the La Paz County Park, Patria Flats Day Use Area, and the Emerald Canyon Golf Course. The La Paz County Sheriff's Department, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, the Buckskin Fire Department, and the San Bernardino County Fire Department provide law enforcement and emergency and fire services to the facility.

During peak visitation months, the U.S. Coast Guard provides river patrol and law enforcement along the Colorado River. The Arizona Game and Fish Department and the California Department of Fish and Game also enforce hunting and fishing regulations on their respective sides of the River.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Because of the large area, dispersed activity centers and the seasonal nature of the site, there is little need for an ATS. Most visitors drive private automobiles and recreational vehicles to various destinations in the 11-mile strip. Since parking capacity and roadway congestion currently rarely occur, there is little need for an ATS within the Parker Strip in the short term. If visitation increases in the future, there may be a need to study the long-term potential for an ATS.

5.2 Range of Feasible Transit Alternatives

Parker Strip staff have informally evaluated the possibility of implementing a “watertaxi” between the Blue Water Casino (located on tribal lands) in the Town of Parker and Parker Dam. The casino is located 10 miles from the nearest private recreational facility along the Colorado River. Currently, private buses travel from Lake Havasu City to the Town of Parker. These buses are primarily used to transport visitors from Lake Havasu City to the casino. Buses use Route 95 in Arizona. A watertaxi service could complement or replace the current bus service and connect with several additional private facilities along the river.

BLM has expressed that any form of public transportation within the Parker Strip should be coordinated with the private sector. Any form of water and/or land transportation connecting the sites will need the support of the various private companies managing facilities on the River. Issues concerning demand, ownership and operation, revenue sharing, and other service characteristics, would need to be addressed as services are coordinated and evaluated.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Bureau of Land Management. *Parker Strip Recreation Area Management Plan*. Havasu Resource Area, Yuma District Office, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of Interior, September 1993.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Myron McCoy, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Parker Strip RMA

Les Allert, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Parker Strip RMA